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Animal Behaviour Fieldwork: Introducing Psychology Students to the Process of Science

Tom Dickins & Peter Donovan

<http://dissentwithmodification.com/>

Introduction

- BPS accreditation is necessarily limiting
- Research methods (RM)
 - α Experimental method
 - β Qualitative methods
- UEL
 - Core RM at levels 1 & 2
 - Statistics lectures
 - Structured exercises
 - Simulation not true research
 - Level 3 research project
- This paper is about one solution to this issue



History of the fieldtrip



- Lundy
 - An island off the North Devon coast
- 1979-1999 University of Liverpool
 - Later collaboration with LIHE (now Hope)
- Level 2 & 3 students
- Academic research too

Preparing for the trip

- Recruit in the autumn for a trip in the summer
 - Take levels 2, 3 and M
 - All do projects or theses of different lengths
- Health and safety briefing in the spring
- Richmond trip
 - Use of optical equipment
 - How do the students operate in a fairly wild place?
 - What do they see?
 - What questions do they generate?
 - Question their anthropomorphism

A fortnight on Lundy

- Day 1
 - Arrival
 - Orienting walk

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6nC6ToPh7I>

 - What did you see?
- Day 2
 - Extensive tour with planned stops
 - Student exercises:
 - Observe, note, hypothesize function
 - Evening seminar at The Barn
 - Students to present their most interesting observation of the day
 - How could this be turned into a study?
- Days 3 – 5
 - Small group work on chosen species
 - Generate research questions
 - Begin field diary
 - Staff visited each field site
 - Discuss ideas in the field
 - Introduce ethograms
 - Evening seminars
 - Groups presented
 - Discussion about motor and functional descriptions
 - Generate and discuss alternative accounts of observed behaviour

A fortnight on Lundy

- Days 6-8
 - Group work
 - Developing more focused questions
 - Different angles on the same species
 - Developing a project
 - Evening seminars
- Days 9-14
 - Running the projects
 - Evening seminars
- Other support:
 - Morning and early evening tutorials
 - Pub surgery
 - Library resources from the Lundy Field Society
 - Our own resources brought with us
 - Teaching assistants

Types of project: Gulls

- Large colonies
- Basic questions:
 - What is the significance of the coloration?
 - Why the red spot on the lower mandible?
 - Is there structure to the colony?
 - Concept of adaptation
- Specific questions:
 - How is aggression distributed across the colony?



Types of project: Soay

- Sexually dimorphic
- Segregated groups
- Basic questions:
 - What constitutes a group?
 - Proximity or behavioural indices?
- Specific questions:
 - How does vigilance differ across groups?
 - Are there sex differences in vigilance and grazing?
 - Are there flight differences?



Types of project: Seals

- Only observable at the surface and on rocks
- Basic questions:
 - What is the age and sex distribution within a group?
- Specific questions:
 - How are behaviours distributed about the cove?
 - How is this distribution affected by tide, boats, divers, time of day?



Types of project: Ponies

- All female group of ten
- Basic question:
 - How can individuals be identified?
- Specific questions:
 - Who jostles whom?
 - Who grooms whom?
 - Are there differences in frequency across all possible dyads?



Types of project: Swallows

- A small number of nests throughout the village
- Basic question:
 - How spread out are the nests?
- Specific questions:
 - How many times are individual chicks fed?
 - How many times do male and female adults feed chicks?
 - Do chicks jostle for positions?
 - Are these positions favoured?



Conclusion



- Benefits of group living and working
- Students prepared for future research
- Students understand the transition from question to hypothesis to study
- Now we need to expand this offer

Photo credit



David Hardman, London Metropolitan University